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ABSTRACT

This paper views the adaptive behavior of individuals with mental retardation as a coping response to the biological and social demands of the environment. Adaptive skills are contrasted with adaptive behaviors, with skills being based primarily on developing new learning and habituating specific responses. Adaptive behavior represents a more overall quality, while adaptive skills are quantitative achievements which feed into adaptive behavior. One of the problems in dealing with adaptive behavior is the conflict created between the biological and social needs of the individual in such activities as toileting. The role of intervention is to use the individual ecology and the social ecology with which the individual must cope as an interactive force to develop both the inter-psychological and intra-psychological processing that allows for higher levels of functioning. Coping development is the daily visible expression of intelligence, involving sensorimotor development and cognitive development. The need to examine such adaptive behavior factors as rate of learning and social awareness is noted. (JDD)

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ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR VS ADAPTIVE SKILLS:
Dimensions in coping development

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ADAPTIVE BEHAVIOR VS ADAPTIVE SKILLS:

Dimensions in coping development

I have chosen this title because, in the 21 odd years since AAMD, (now AAMR) published it's first Adaptive Behavior Scales, there has been a tendency on the part of many workers in the field to try to force the concept into a wide variety of theoretical considerations. Many have absolutely no relationship to the broad constructs of adaptation as they were originally introduced, and many actually serve to move the concept away from a criterion based measurement of coping behavior to a more achievement based measure of skills or, unfortunately, the lack of skills. It is this latter outcome which obviously has been the most destructive, and unfortunately, somewhat represents the path that AAMR is currently considering taking by converting the concept from adaptive behavior to "adaptive skills".

Stepping back and looking at our achievement over the last 20 years, it becomes apparent that we have, in fact, developed a strong and in many respects truly magnificent breakthrough in our understanding of how persons with mentally retardation and other forms of developmental disability can bring themselves into active participation within their community. This is certainly not a new consideration. Vygotsky, writing in 1929, (Wertsch, 1985) spoke of "the degree that the child grows into the surrounding social environment in the process of adaptation (is a measure) of how he or she develops the basic operations of individual social behavior". It's true that Vygotsky didn't attempt to scale or measure that degree of adaptation, but AAMD (1961) in it's original definition, "the manner in which the individual copes with the natural and social demands of the environment", picked up on Vygotsky's thinking and bringing it into the latter half of the 20th century attempted to develop a method whereby one could deal with persons on both their inter-psychological plane and their intra-psychological plane.

Adaptive behavior is the result of complex reflex and learning processes which are social in origin and intrinsically related to "higher human mental functions", (Luria, 1980). Adaptive behavior is based on coping responses to the biological and social demands of the environment. Again, it is no accident that we conceptualize these behaviors in a manner similar to the ideas put forth by Luria in defining higher human mental functions. We have always had recognition that we were dealing with individuals who possessed all of the necessary human qualities but that there were interfering factors, typically the failure of some of the channels of reflex development, and the resulting learning processes, or other factors relating to the biological origins of the particular individual. But, we also recognize that behavior drives genetics and that these biological origins are themselves modified through the expressed behavior of the person. At no point in time are we dealing with a static organism who is of necessity fixed in certain behavior patterns, but rather, a highly fluid organism which, through appropriate intervention and appropriate understanding, can grow and develop throughout their lifetime. This

growth and development emerges from the modes in which they attempt to meet or cope with the demands of their surrounding environment. We have a special responsibility to alter and enhance through the process of helping them open new channels within these reflex processes so that they may develop more appropriately. Again, back to Vygotsky (1986), this type of intervention was described in terms of zones of proximal development. Recognizing such a zone is the distance between the actual developmental level of the individual as determined by our evidence of their independent problem-solving and their potential developmental level as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or with the collaboration of more capable peers. In order to determine this and further to see how we are going to proceed, we need to evaluate the adaptive value of all those specific behaviors. Recognizing that the current or contemporary behavior of any individual represents the adaptation of that individual to a previous environment. That is, it represents how that individual has learned to behave in the face of this type or class of stimulus, and drawing on this memory function how one might respond at this time. Unfortunately, we are dealing with a group of humans who do not generalize readily, who do not classify various behaviors under similar labels but rather think of each behavior as a separate entity. So, part of our intervention is based on helping them recognize those behaviors which worked for them in previous situations, and which can work for them again. This, in a sense, is a matter of judging where the child is, and how the child came to be what they are now versus how they can be helped to become what they are not yet.

Adaptive skills are also the result of complex reflex processes, and they are also based on these same type of learning processes. But, they are based primarily on developing new learning and habituating specific responses. This emphasis on habituation is valuable, it is necessary, but obviously it sometimes interferes with our hope for generalization which would permit higher levels of function. However, such skills are also social in origin, and typically they need to be taught. Adaptive skills grow sporadically, based both on previous levels of development and personal learning priorities. Skills are also related to higher human mental functions but involve greater emphasis on the rate of learning and direct instruction. Both adaptive behavior and adaptive skills require increased social intervention, but the skills are based on more direct management and at times imposed learning.

This is one of the problems in dealing with adaptive behavior. Because from a broad frame of reference, adaptive behavior is, as we indicated, a response to both the natural and biological, and social needs of the individual. In some instances, that creates a conflict. The most obvious example is toileting. The response to the biological needs of the individual requires that they void themselves. This actually is a biological response which in most individuals, regardless of the extent of their disability, or their level of retardation, is not a particularly difficult task. However, when we relate this to the social demands of the environment, we find that the mere response of voiding themselves is a source of great problems. Society is very demanding in terms of where, under what circumstances, and how this is done. The child is faced with having to avoid what would be described as the "natural or biological" reaction in favor of conforming to social mores.

Thus, adaptive behavior represents a more overall quality, while adaptive skills are quantitative, achievements which feed into adaptive behavior. These skills help us and the child work together so that the child can habituate those behaviors where this response is valuable such as walking, feeding, taking care of personal hygiene, etc., and can learn also to develop skills in response to the social demands. Successful coping requires experienced in both the skill and the "habit". From the adaptive behavior frame of reference, this comes into the whole process of evaluating a child through the profile of "hills and valleys" which become a basis for intervention permitting improved total development, to some extent generalization, and the development of learning priorities. This concept of "hills and valleys" is, again, related to the notions of zones of proximal development of Luria and Vygotsky. Within this area of priority responses to social demands, there also emerges problems of social visibility.

One of the major problems that confront persons with various types of developmental disability is that quality we have identified through the literature as issues surrounding "invisibility" (Leland, 1978). We can recognize that our stock and trade, in terms of the way we earn our living, is a matter of visibility. If I was not visible, Ohio State University would not pay me the salary that they pay me nor would I have the freedom to do the things that I need to do. We must also recognize that persons with various levels of developmental visibility cannot afford those levels of visibility. Because in terms of what their levels of functional achievement are when they are left to their own devices, (which is how we got to their diagnosis in the first place), produce levels of visibility which may have a tendency to annoy the rest of the people in their environment and, in fact, become threats in terms of inappropriate labeling, inappropriate programming and still today, in many instances, the possibility of some form of institutionalization. We have major problems helping the persons with whom we are working to learn how to survive, not only in their own personal environment but within other environments where they may have to work or live. This, again, is a matter of using the individual ecology of each individual and the social ecology with which they must cope as an interactive force to, again, develop both the inter and intra-psychological processing allowing for higher levels of functioning.

Coping development as such is the daily visible expression of intelligence. It is dependent on a variety of mediating processes. The most important of these in humans is speech, but they also include a large number of other faculties. Some of which we share with lesser animals, but most of which are very unique to us as humans because of the existence of a secondary signaling system, a speech provoking process that means all other mediating processes are affected either positively or negatively by the way in which the child adapts within the communication area. This is, again, of social origin. We said earlier that experience drives genetics, we need to recognize that experience also drives behavior, and that behavior is the source of human cognition. On this basis, every waking hour is potentially a learning field. We have spoken of individuals who have had one year of experience ten time versus people who have ten years of experience, and we indicate that jokingly in terms of people within our profession, but let us remember that the individuals with whom we are working cannot afford the luxury of not using their daily experience as a learning field, because,

again, left to their own devices, they are sufficiently delayed that they have become visible to the rest of the people in their social sphere. Therefore, they need every opportunity they can get to catch up. Not only in terms of adaptive skills and the coping required through those areas but also in terms of general coping skills relating to adaptive behavior in terms of increased socialization, increased participation within their environment and increased growth toward a major objective which we have described previously as the right of every human to function as a useful and productive member of their society (Leland & Smith, 1974).

In this regard, intelligence is a broad-based concept. It involves sensorimotor development, which of course with the population we are discussing, is one of the most important areas of error with which we must cope. It secondly obviously involves the development of cognition through appropriate receptive process (a major source of pre, peri, and post-natal error), perception, including both skills of accommodation and assimilation, and since we are dealing with specifically human organisms, aperception, their ability to have ideas and opinions which are very personal to them in the sense that they have developed them through the mediated interaction with their intra-personal self.

Further, we need to look at the rate of learning, which is, of course, what is measured in an I.Q. test, and some of the artificial adaptive behavior scales on the market. This is obviously the weakest measure of intelligence. It is not important to know what individuals would have done, had they been normal, but, rather that these individuals are doing at the time of evaluation, so that, given their current patterns of behavior, their next learning step can be identified. We need to look at adaptive behavior which has it's own measurement parameters in terms of how the individual uses these qualities in developing a higher level of functional intelligence, and we need to look at social awareness which obviously is one of the higher levels of maturation involving, as it does, the taking into consideration of the other individual or another individual's level of coping or need at the same time. Now, today, we are only discussing the adaptive behavior aspect of intelligence. We must recognize that this whole process interweaves with each other to form a vast pictorial carpet of individual growth. These five elements may be described as the warp and the woof of intelligence and each is inter-dependent on the other. But, learning to cope, that is, adaptive behavior, has it's own special role in that it represents the reversible functional behaviors (including the skills) what makes it possible to deal with social paradox, personal disability (or handicap), and most importantly to continue the basis of cognitive growth.

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